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SUBJECT: BULGARIA REACTS WITH RESTRAINT TO LIBYAN DEATH SENTENCES,  
URGES SWIFT REVIEW

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Bulgarian officials reacted with restraint to the Libyan Supreme Court decision to uphold the death sentences of the five Bulgarian nurses and Palestinian doctor accused of deliberately infecting Libyan children with HIV. Both the President and the Prime Minister noted that the ruling was expected and urged swift action by Libya's Higher Judicial Council to allow the medics to come home. The two said Bulgaria will continue to work jointly with the EU and other foreign partners to reach a favorable solution. Politicians of all stripes said that while they were disappointed by the court's verdict, they pinned their hopes on a positive decision by the Judicial Council. Partly as a result of government urging, the larger Bulgarian media outlets were relatively restrained in their reaction when compared to the last go-around seven months ago. "Sega," one of the smaller dailies, called the trial a "a legal farce" and note that eight years of silent diplomacy by Sofia and its international partners have so far failed to bring results. END SUMMARY

PRESIDENT, PM HOPE JUDICIAL COUNCIL WILL END AGONY

12. (U) President Georgi Parvanov said, "Bulgaria expects and insists on a swift summoning of Libya's High Judicial Council for a final conclusion of the Bulgarian nurses' case." Parvanov thanked Bulgaria's foreign partners for their support, including the efforts to achieve a fair settlement for release of the Bulgarian medical workers and to find a sustainable solution to the plight of the Libyan HIV-infected children. "We will continue our efforts, together with our European and other partners, towards achievement of a favorable decision by the High Judicial Council," said Parvanov.

13. (U) PM Sergei Stanishev echoed the President, saying the court ruling was "expected, given the course of the trial so far." He reaffirmed Bulgaria's position that the medics were innocent, and noted that this position has been supported by serious evidence. The PM said the expected meeting of the Libyan Supreme Judicial Council July 16 was a positive development that would opening the way for a political solution of the case and "put an end to this agony." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Bulgaria expected a swift summoning of Libya's High Judicial Council and final resolution of the case. "We are prepared to react in the coming days depending on the situation's development," the statement said.

POLITICAL SOLUTION EXPECTED TO END CRISIS

14. (SBU) MPs from all parties said in their public statement that while they were disappointed by the confirmation of the death sentences, they hoped for a favorable decision of the Higher

Judicial Council. The parliamentary group of the ruling Socialist Party said Bulgaria hoped the nurses and the Palestinian doctor would be pardoned by the High Judicial Council with no delays. But in private conversations, some MPs appeared more pessimistic, noting that "while a resolution on the case seemed closer than ever, Qadhafi is unpredictable."

¶5. (U) Center-right MP Konstantin Dimitrov said publicly that Libya's handling of the case amounted to political blackmail, and urged the government to disclose details about Bulgaria's participation in the international fund set up to help the Libyan children. Extreme nationalist Volen Siderov again floated his bizarre idea to arrest five Libyans in Bulgaria and exchange them for the nurses. He blasted the government for not taking a tougher stand, saying that both Bulgaria and the EU should have frozen economic ties with Libya long ago. Bulgaria's 18 members of the European Parliament issued a letter to the European Commission calling for a revision of the EU policy in regard to Libya "if no positive solution is found in the next few days."

¶6. (U) Not surprisingly, the bluntest comment came from populist Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov. "They (the Libyans) continue to make mockery of us and of the fate of these women. This is a disgrace," he said, calling for increased pressure on Libya. "There should be stronger pressure on Libya, every second, at every level, from everywhere," said Borissov.

#### PRESS RELATIVELY RESTRAINED, HIGHLIGHTS NURSES' INNOCENCE

¶7. (U) The medics' death sentences made front-page headlines in the Bulgarian press, but the two largest-circulation dailies - which also happen to have the closest relations with the government - were uncharacteristically restrained. However, some smaller outlets used the occasion to take pot shots at the Libyans and the GOB. Under the headline: "Innocent but With the Stigma 'Guilty' for Life," Sega Daily commented: "Now they are trying to placate us by saying that the medics will return to Bulgaria because somebody in Tripoli will show the mercy to get rid of them. They are supposed to be sent back under the explicit condition that we will keep them in prison

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instead of Libya. This is the price Bulgaria has to pay for their lives. Bulgaria will have to face the humiliation of considering them, at least formally, as criminals, having insisted for years that they are innocent."

¶8. (U) Under the headline "Patience for the Nurses," largest-circulation daily Trud said the Court's ruling was expected and warned against overly-optimistic forecasts that the nurses will be back in Bulgaria within a few months. The paper also printed Ambassador Beyrle's reaction that "the U.S. is disappointed by yesterday's outcome." "They Are Innocent Nevertheless" reads the front-page headline of Standard Daily, which also noted that neither Bulgaria, the EU or the U.S. have confirmed Tuesday's reports by international media about a settlement with the children's families. The organizers of the "You Are Not Alone" campaign said they would pass out for free 100,000 posters reading "Innocent" as part of their ongoing campaign. However, they responded positively to the government's request that they desist from plans to paint the word "Innocent" in seven-foot tall letters on a wall across the street from the Libyan embassy.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT. Overall, the Bulgarian response to this latest development has been surprisingly restrained. One official in the Prime Minister's office told us that he spoke personally with editors of the major media outlets, urging them to adopt a responsible tone. All eyes are now on the meeting of the Higher Judicial Council, scheduled for July 16. The longer the Council takes to decide the fate of the nurses, the greater will be the pressure on Bulgarian politicians to respond with forceful public statements. For the time being, Bulgarian officials are content to await the next act. However, the underlying passions that this issue invokes in Bulgaria will be difficult to control if the curtain does not come down soon. BEYRLE